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TAGS: [PREL](#) [KPAO](#) [KIRC](#) [SCUL](#) [AF](#)
SUBJECT: IRANIAN INFLUENCE IN AFHGAN HIGHER ED: SUBTLE BUT
SIGNIFICANT

¶1. SUMMARY: Given cultural and linguistic ties between Afghanistan and Iran, no one is surprised that Iranian influence permeates Afghan higher education. Ironically, just as Iran closes university access to Afghan refugees in Iran, it is becoming more deeply involved in Afghan higher education. Cash-strapped Afghan universities have found Iran a willing economic supporter. The real impact of Iranian influence in Afghan higher education lies in the ability to block dissemination of Western ideas and values to the young Afghan generation. It is difficult to assess whether the motivation is benign or malicious, but in order to counter this influence, we must make greater financial contributions and establish a greater U.S. presence at the university level (see paras 25-28). This cable is a joint Public Affairs-PRT endeavor.

FROM CONTRACTORS IN THE FIELD

¶2. (SBU) When asked about Iranian influence in Afghan universities, contacts of our officers across the country give us a consistent response: it is significant but very subtle in approach. The Iranians have a presence in nearly every university, ranging from providing textbooks to study abroad trips to Iran for professors, deans, rectors and even students. While most Westerners believe Iranians' motives are political in nature, no one is sure of their specific objective. Nearly every book in Afghanistan is published in Iran and a very large Iranian bookshop has recently opened in Kabul.

¶3. (SBU) The real impact of Iranian influence in Afghan higher education lies in actions to block dissemination of Western ideas and values in educational materials and instruction, an area in which Iran has exercised great influence. Most of their activity is done without publicity. As a result, we must compete with the subtle but powerful cultural connections that exist between Iran and the universities in Afghanistan.

Ministry of Higher Education Perspective:

¶4. (SBU) According to a trusted Afghan American advisor at the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE), the Ministry recognizes Iranian influence in a number of ways. The single dominant area of influence comes in the form of textbooks. Even though many are translations from western authors and may not contain overt Iranian ideology, these translations have been approved by the Islamic Republic of Iran to omit unsanctioned views. Themes of democracy, free speech, and human rights are conspicuous by their absence. Iran's monopoly on the textbook market influences Afghans by the ideas which simply are not translated.

¶5. (SBU) Our contact also complained about Iran "infiltrating and influencing via Afghans." In other words, a number of professors and MOHE personnel who have graduated from Iranian institutions tend to carry back with them Iranian ideologies. He specifically noted World Bank programs which are designed by individuals heavily influenced by Iranian ideas. He also expressed concern at the number of Iranian-educated Afghans who have taken administrative

roles at MOHE. He also noted that once they were in civil service positions, it was next to impossible to get rid of them.

16. (SBU) The MOHE has sought to balance Iranian influence by turning towards India and South Asian University in New Delhi. This university, set to open August 2010, will offer Master's Degree programs. Given the lack of Master's Degree programs in Afghanistan, Afghans must travel abroad to seek post-graduate education; the hope is that they will turn to South Asian University rather than to Iranian universities. Family ties tend to pull young Afghans back home from neighboring countries, less likely when they study in Europe or the United States. Afghanistan is expected to contribute a mere 3% of South Asian University's operating costs (\$150,000 the first year). In addition, 3,500 Afghans receive Indian scholarships annually. In effect, MOHE's strategy balances Iranian influence with Indian influence, ensuring that democratic values filter into the system.

HERAT: GREATEST CAUSE FOR CONCERN

17. (SBU) The most significant Iranian penetration of higher education is in Herat. Herat University has signed MOUs establishing limited partnerships with five Iranian higher education institutes or universities. Most call for sending some Afghan faculty and students to Iranian institutes. At least fifteen professors from the Law and Political Science, Agriculture, Economics, and Sharia Faculties reportedly are studying for Master's Degrees in Iranian universities. Students go for shorter periods of time.

18. (SBU) Iran has been the largest donor by far to Herat University, which is not surprising given the common language and geographical

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proximity. Iran established a cultural room in the Faculty of Education in 2007 with several thousand books. Several Iranian professors taught at Herat University in 2008 in two faculties, Law and Political Science and Agriculture. Several professors and students have gone on short study trips to Iran in recent years.

19. (SBU) In 2008 a delegation comprised of Iranian university representatives and the Iranian Ambassador in Kabul visited Herat University. An Afghan source who was present reported that during the visit, the Herat University Chancellor at the time and the Iranian delegation verbally agreed to send experienced Iranian professors to Herat University to teach Afghan professors for a period of two and a half years. One month each semester, Afghan professors would go to Iranian universities to use their labs until Herat University's science labs are equipped. Afghan professors pursuing Master's Degrees would thus be prepared, according to the Iranian delegation, to teach students in Master's Degree courses. The Iranian delegation also said they were ready to extend cooperation in cultural and research areas.

10 (SBU) The previous Herat University Chancellor tells us he feels constantly engaged in a balancing act between increasing offers of assistance from Iran and a few offers of assistance from European and American universities or governments. As he explained to us, it is a matter of economics. Our contact in the MOHE, however, was openly skeptical of where his loyalties lie, given frequent trips to Iran.

11. (SBU) On May 9, he was fired by the Ministry of Higher Education. Currently, the head of the Economics Faculty is serving as the Chancellor. Our contact in Herat did not know whether he might keep the position in the long term, but indicated that he is generally well liked and respected at the university. How he will handle Iranian attempts to influence the faculty and students is yet unknown.

AND AT OTHER PROVINCIAL UNIVERSITIES...

12. (SBU) Herat University authorities also reportedly helped arrange an invitation to the Chancellor of Balkh University to discuss exchange and partnership opportunities with an Iranian university. Balkh University has proposed sending two engineering

instructors.

¶13. (SBU) In Mazar-e-Sharif, the most significant Iranian presence is not educational, but cultural. The large, three-story cultural center was inaugurated on the first day of the Persian New Year. Additionally, Iranians donated 1,000 Farsi books to the library of the Information and Culture Department, the construction of which was funded five years ago by PRT Mazar.

¶14. (SBU) Also in the north, in Takhar province, the Iranians have funded two larger projects: the religious faculty building at Taloqan University and some of the paved roads in the northern part of the city. In Kunduz, the Iranians have recently provided funding and textbooks to the Institute of Higher Education's newly-established law department. Overall funding contribution is rumored to amount to about \$20K. About 15% of Kunduz's population is Shia, mostly Hazara.

¶15. We found significant Iranian activity even in the predominantly Pashtu (Sunni) city of Jalalabad. In April, the former Nangarhar University Chancellor told the PRT that the Iranian consulate in Jalalabad has been aggressive in the past two months and believes its presence in Jalalabad was a strategic decision to influence the university. The consulate promised furniture for the library in exchange for the University allowing the consulate to build a common building for the students on campus. The consulate offered him a trip to Iran. He refused, and the consulate has proposed that a few teachers travel to Iran in the future. When asked about perceptions of Iranians, the Chancellor told us, "People in Nangarhar are thirsty for contact with any foreigners." To date, however, the consulate has not given the university any money.

¶16. (SBU) In Kandahar, Iran built the Ministry of Information and Culture building. While the Line Director offered us space in that building to house a Lincoln Center (American Corner), the governor has adamantly refused to allow an Iranian Cultural Center there. We hope to open a Lincoln Center there in the coming fiscal year.

IN KABUL...

¶17. (SBU) At Kabul University, the Lincoln Center and Iranian Cultural Center are side-by-side in the library. The Chancellor has given us free rein to hold teacher trainings, student meetings, webchats, and other activities, whereas he limits Iranian activity. The Iranians funded a print facility and run the large on-campus

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bookstore. An Iranian librarian recently proposed that the Iranian system be used to catalog and digitize Kabul Medical University's library. USAID, however, had already provided funding for Arizona University to train the Kabul University and Kabul Medical University librarians in the Library of Congress system. Of course, USAID turned down the library's request to fund the Iranian Project.

¶18. (SBU) In early May, Kabul University's library held an international book fair. The U.S. Embassy book exhibit displayed books on politics, easy readers, and college preparatory books available at our Lincoln Center. We also gave away our popular President Obama booklets as well as "Mosques in America" calendars and booklets. Eager students quickly snatched up these high-quality publications, which were in both Pashto and Dari or exclusively in English. The Iranian exhibit was large, and included posters (in English) of popular religious and tourist sites in Iran, and a display of Iranian pottery. On the first day, the Iranians gave away free tourist maps in Dari/Farsi and English. No Iranian handouts were available in Pashto. The Iranian cultural officer worked at the exhibit (and even took five of our "Mosques in America" calendars).

¶19. (SBU) Thirteen local vendors were also present at the book fair. Almost their entire stock was in Dari/Farsi and included many Western books, translated into Farsi, and published in Iran, with no apparent regard for intellectual property rights. Iran reprints a large number of Western textbooks but intentionally omits certain subjects and concepts. The textbooks gain credibility and influence

among the professors at Kabul University because they were written by Western authors.

¶20. (SBU) Two private educational institutes in Kabul also deserve mention, one, as disseminators of Iranian cultural influence, the other as a western-influenced Shia religious school. Khatam-ul-Nabieen ("Seal of the Prophet") Institute of Higher Education and Academy is run by Ayatollah Mohseni. Mohseni was a vocal supporter of the controversial Shia personal law that was signed this past spring. While exact funding sources for this institute cannot be verified, it is rumored that much comes from Iran. The campus is certainly one of the most attractive, modern and well-equipped we've seen in Afghanistan. Subjects offered include: Law and Jurisprudence; Qur'an and Hadith Sciences; Philosophy and Theology; Political Sciences; and Social Sciences. Their attempts to start an English Department have been stalled and unorganized - offering a potential opportunity for USG English Language programs.

¶21. (SBU) The other institute is the Faiz Mohammad Kateb Institute of Higher Education. The founder of the KIHE, Mohammad Ibrahim Qasimi, immigrated to Canada during the Soviet invasion. His investment, along with tuition fees, serves as the primary source of funding. Though its curriculum is based on Shia Islam, this institute is more secular and progressive than Mohseni's institute.

¶22. (SBU) Polcouns called on Kateb Institute Dean Mohammad Amin Ahmadi on May 25. The Institute opened in 2008, and is currently in its third semester. Student enrollment is over 700, comprised of both full-time students, and those enrolled in evening classes. The faculty is comprised almost entirely of Shia professors, including Ahmadi, who received their post-graduate training in Iran. Ahmadi estimated the student body to be about 75 percent Sunni. Ahmadi reported no tension between Shia faculty and the largely Sunni student body. The Institute currently offers courses in the human sciences (law, international relations, etc.). The Law Faculty is also developing programs for future training of judges and prosecutors. Ahmadi wishes to expand its curriculum offering to include banking, insurance, social sciences, etc.

BAMYAN & KHOST - THE EXCEPTIONS

¶23. (SBU) Iran provides no funding to the University of Bamyan and sponsors no programming. Students there, a number of whom are returnees from Iran, generally express distrust and dislike for Iran (and Pakistan). They also dismiss supporters of more fundamentalist interpretations of Shiism as either being from Iran or having been "brainwashed" by Iran, despite the fact that a number of mullahs in Bamyan received religious training in Iran.

¶24. (SBU) The United Arab Emirates funded and built Sheikh Zaid University in Khost. There appears to be little or no Iranian involvement or attempts to influence.

RECOMMENDATIONS

¶25. (SBU) We will continue to produce materials in Dari and Pashto

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to counter the almost exclusively Iranian-Farsi materials on the market. IIP's AVA Collection, which provided limited runs of high-quality Farsi booklets, was extremely popular at the universities. We will require additional resources to continue print runs of existing titles and to expand the collection to include democracy, governance, American life, economics, and other subjects. We also plan to support Pashto publications in order to fill that vital void. To date, all Pashto-language publications are post-produced. It would be helpful if IIP could also support Pashto-language initiatives.

¶26. (SBU) Even more productive would be a full scale U.S. Embassy book translation program, which would allow neglected themes of democracy, rights, and Western values into the mainstream. For instance, the standard textbook on American Government and Politics is Iranian translated and published - we have no way now to

translate and publish the original text completely.

¶27. (SBU) We strongly recommend expanding educational opportunities, whether through the Fulbright program or scholarships to South Asian University, to establish more of an American imprint in Afghan higher education and thus build influence among the rising generation. We need to foster personal relationships with university students, so they can better see that the United States is dedicated to helping Afghans rebuild their educational system and thus their future. Done well, the potential impact on the future of Afghanistan could be powerful.

¶28. (SBU) Finally, as we have urged repeatedly, we can exploit to great effect against both Iranian and Taliban influence a full time RELO, to meet the huge demand for English language learning across Afghanistan. In our judgment, the current regional misallocation of scarce RELO resources urgently needs redress.

EIKENBERRY